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Case of the beheaded Russians: How U.S. monitors world

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WASHINGTON — A U.S. intelligence report that 35 Soviet military advisers were beheaded in Afghanistan about six weeks before the invasion points out several problems in the release of information to the public.

The main problems are:

- How does the government get its information?
- How good are its sources?
- What can the public believe?

Marshall Shulman, the State Department's Soviet expert who is considered a supporter of detente, said that the Soviets were beheaded in Herat, near the Iranian border. He added that their heads were carried around on spears in a torchlight parade through the bazaars of Herat.

"If you're looking to apologize for the Soviet action, you may believe that," a high-ranking White House official said when told of the beheading report. "On the other hand you may be intensely skeptical about the reliability of the source."

National security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, for example, is known to believe that Shulman is inclined to be too soft on the Soviets.

Thus, it can be asked whether Shulman made the report to help put the Soviet invasion "in perspective" and put brakes on U.S. actions over the invasion. Unfortunately, the answer will probably never be known.

Shulman said that he got the information from the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) — the in-house intelligence gathering organization that sifts information from the CIA, Defense Intelligence Agency and National Security Agency.

INR does technical intercepting plus the translation, but does no intelligence gathering.

Asked where INR would have received the information on the beheading of the Soviets, a State Department analyst explained:

"That would be based on a field report that came in from the CIA, DIA or our embassy in Kabul, based presumably on an eyewitness who told a reporting officer in the field.

"It could have been an embassy officer or U.S. military attache who was in Herat on

from one of its sources through a clandestine channel such as a CIA operative in another capital like Islamabad (Pakistan)."

There can be and usually are conflicting intelligence reports. These create a credibility problem for the White House or State Department spokesman and ultimately for the government. So the spokesman, according to press officer David Passage, "will reflect only the official consensus."

That, he explained, "will almost inevitably be conservative. It will be the lowest common denominator upon which a majority of intelligence analysts and policymakers can agree."

How then does it happen that last Monday, for example, State Department spokesman Hodding Carter estimated that there are 85,000 Soviet troops in Afghanistan, while ABC News reported there are well over 100,000?

And that the U.S. Embassy in Kabul was quoted in a New York Times story last Tuesday as putting the official figure at a much more conservative 30,000 to 40,000?

"An individual reporter is basing his information on cultivated sources like someone on the (State Department's) Soviet desk," Passage said. "But that will be valid only insofar as it reflects the views of the person or persons to whom he talked.

"Our process, namely that of a spokesman — be it Hodding Carter (State Department), Tom Ross (the Pentagon) or Jody Powell (the White House) — is a different one. It consists of asking questions of the bureaucracy in order to get a clear, coordinated response to come back down in the form of 'guidance.'

"Our procedure would be to go to INR or the Bureau of Near East and Asian Affairs and ask them point-blank what is the most recent estimate of the number of Soviet troops in Afghanistan?

"They will then go to CIA, DIA, NSA, NSC and any other sources to put together something that accurately reflects the number of troops that are there. Bingo. Drew Middleton (New York Times) or someone with a hawkish bent may have his own sources within the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.

you say?" That person may be acting on fragmentary information and will say there are 115,000 troops. Maybe there are 115,000.

"But until there is a new consensus in the intelligence community on the higher figure, the official spokesman will be reflecting what the consensus is. He will not be reflecting either the higher or lower figure."

He conceded that "we were very slow to confirm the existence of a Soviet brigade in Cuba."

He said the State Department could not do that officially "until there was a consensus within the intelligence community on evidence of a brigade command structure.

"We were not prepared to confirm what some autonomous intelligence expert decided on his own."

How then was Hodding Carter last Monday able to arrive at the figure of 85,000 Soviet troops? Carter himself "has no intelligence-estimating capability," Passage explained. "He uses whatever is provided to him thoroughly cleared by whoever ought to have

some influence."

In practical terms, he said, "this means NSA operating on reports from our embassy in Kabul; INR operating on the basis of intelligence gathered by the U.S. intelligence community and CIA summaries.

"They will include NSA radio monitoring of aircraft flying into and out of Kabul and one or more Soviet airfields, monitoring of radio intercepts between Soviet units such as who has been instructed by Moscow to send how many men where.

"It may include overhead photography by reconnaissance such as SR-71 and U-2 flights, conversations with friendly governments in the area and reports from observers on the ground, for example, a U.S. Army attache talking to an Indian Army counterpart about reports from their embassy in Kabul.

"In sum, there is a wealth of material," Passage said.

And that is where the problems begin — interpreting the "raw intelligence data."